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## Changing the Assessment Paradigm in Slovenian Schools\*

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### INTRODUCTION

Changes in assessment with the tendency to improve these important processes is not something specific for the Slovenian school system, it is a phenomenon, which can be observed in many countries (Broadfoot, 1995, Gipps, 1994, Harlen et al., 1995, Marhuenda, 1997, Mavrommatis, 1997).

It is possible to explain this phenomenon from at least two interrelated origins:

- the so-called "new paradigm" (Gipps, 1994, Henning-Stout, 1994), with cognitive psychology as a methodological paradigm and as an information processing approach (Pučko, 1997) and a constructive perspective on the process of learning and teaching as the main theoretical initiatives;
- educational reforms, curriculum changes, international comparisons and the need for raising educational standards (Broadfoot, 1995, Eckstein, 1996). As stressed also by Kellaghan (1996, p. 156) "... international comparative studies are considered to have an important role to play in raising educational standards...".

### 1. The assessment paradigm shift and some of the main premises of the new paradigm

One of the most important premises of the new paradigm is *formative assessment*, which can be defined either as the "assessment concerned with providing information for class management decisions" (Duncan, Dunn, 1988, p. 73), or all kinds of assessment which promote the learning process itself with a "dynamic approach to the relationship between assessment, teaching and learning" (Torrance, 1995, p. 3).

Formative assessment is strongly connected with feedback. "Feedback must be descriptive, specifying, constructing the way forward" (Stobard and Gipps, 1997, p. 22).

"For assessment to be formative, it must be frequent, individualized, carefully targeted and offer substantive feedback to guide subsequent efforts to improve." (Editorial, 1997, p. 333).

**Self-evaluation** and **self-assessment** are highly connected with formative assessment and also with self-reference.

Children are not able to assess their own achievement without appropriate feedback, which should be based upon their own achievement in the past (self-reference). Each child should have an opportunity to develop the ability to evaluate his/her own work.

The aim of self-assessment procedures "is not only to encourage pupils to become independent learners, but also to develop metacognitive strategies" (Stobart and Gipps, 1997, p. 17).

New assessment procedures should develop *metacognitive strategies*, which means that pupils begin to think and analyse not only what or whether they had learnt, but also how they were learning. They are thinking about the process of learning, they distinguish between more and less

effective learning strategies and are able to change/adopt more effective ones to improve their performance.

Knowing the aims and criteria of performance, individualised feedback and self-assessment procedures are conditions and "tools" for developing metacognitive strategies.

**Authentic assessment** is a part of "normal, authentic" school work, where the assessment tasks are not artificially created for assessment only. Related terms are contextual and also practical assessment. The point is that assessment tasks are more practically, realistically designed (in the context known to the pupils) and therefore more challenging for pupils.

## **2. Educational reform and assessment changes in Slovenia**

The main assessment changes, planned within the new educational legislation in Slovenia (passed in 1996) and elaborated in the White Paper (1996), are:

- descriptive assessment during the first period (year 1-3) for all subjects;
- combination of descriptive and classic numerical (marks from 1 to 5) assessment for all subjects during the second period (year 4-6);
- numerical grades (from 1 to 5) for all subjects during the third period (year 7-9) with the combination of special point system for marking different levels of achievement during year 8-9 (within three subjects);
- national tests (an optional information for teachers and parents) at the end of the first (3rd year) and second period (6th year) of compulsory school;
- final external (national) assessments of knowledge at the end of the 9th year (within three subjects).

## **3. Actually implemented changes in Slovenian assessment practice and relations with the new assessment perspectives**

Some of the perspectives and interests of both origins for assessment changes met within concrete practices, which can be noticed in Slovenian schools during the period of the last 5 years, when a stronger movement in education (partly connected with new legislation and partly with increased self-confidence of teachers) has been taking place.

Another origin for some assessment changes is increased awareness of all weaknesses of the current teachers' assessment practices (weaknesses, reported in Black&William's review /1998/ can also be recognised in Slovenian schools.)

So a great deal of the assessment changes provided with the new Educational Act are in fact just a legalisation of the existing practice, with some of the changes in the phase of experimental practice.

### **3.1. Descriptive assessment**

According to the existing rules a numerical scale with grades from 1 (unsuccessful) to 5 (excellent) from the second part of the first school year and onward for the majority of subjects

and a verbal, three-level assessment scale (less successful, successful and very successful) for music, fine arts, crafts and home-economics is still in practice in Slovenian schools.

Descriptive assessment (teachers assess children's achievement with verbal descriptive feedback) during the first two or three school years is one of the most wide-spread and outstanding changes, triggered by teachers themselves already in early nineties. This kind of assessment, which will be the norm within the new (nine-year) school, is already a reality as an experimental change in many schools. The common opinion of most teachers, children and parents about descriptive assessment is very positive. There are, however two main weaknesses, which are frequently mentioned: more work for teachers and a lack of useful guidelines. Record-keeping, an integral part of descriptive assessment is from the teachers' perspective especially time-consuming, but helps them to be more systematic in their observation and assessment.

**As part of descriptive assessment a number of additional (implicit) changes and/or theoretical premises are realised: formative assessment, self-reference assessment as part of the instructional process, self-evaluation and authentic/practical assessment with a portfolio.**

Teachers are assessing children's achievements with descriptive comments, orally and occasionally also in written form. Very often descriptions are ipsative, which means that pupil's own past progress is a point of reference, the child is reported as being better, equal or worse than before. This type of feedback also provides children with strategies that they can adopt to develop and improve their work, it encourages children to assess their own work. Children are often stimulated to evaluate their own work, to think about their learning with questions and/or unfinished sentences, like:

*What do I think is good about my work?*

*What do I think could be improved?*

*I have most enjoyed \_\_\_\_\_*

*I may need help with \_\_\_\_\_*

Very often teachers and pupils and/or parents and pupils are stimulated to work together on assessment with writing a report as:

*My parents (mum, dad), my teacher and I have looked at my work.*

*We have decided that I am good at:*

*We feel that I could improve:*

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Such comments can also be part of **portfolio**, which is becoming a regular part of school practice together with descriptive assessment, as realisation of the need that verbal descriptions should have concrete referents.

Children's portfolios are collections of samples of work for each child to demonstrate progress and attainment, to serve as a base for 3-way conferences (teacher, pupil, parents) and to help the teacher to write a summative (descriptive) report (for parents and school file) about child's work over the whole year.

### **3.2 Practical assessment**

Assessment of different kinds of practical work: projects (social sciences), experiential and experimental learning (early science), language portfolio (early foreign language learning),

practical/performance assessment (arts, language skills, music) are becoming more and more a normal part of everyday assessment practices, especially at primary level.

Practical assessment is possible or at least easier if performed in a descriptive way, as the attainments are not standardised, not equal for the whole group or class of children and sometimes very individually designed.

### **3.3. External summative assessment**

External summative assessment at the end of eighth grade is an ideal example how assessment practices designed to serve conflicting purposes have positive and negative effects and cannot be unanimously approved.

This assessment should improve the quality of knowledge at the end of elementary school and is at the same time a tool of selection for upper secondary schools with more applicants that could be enrolled. It is evident also from international comparative studies (Macintosh, 1994, in: Eckstein, 1996, p. 235) that *"the selection continues to be the major purpose of assessment, rather than monitoring, or diagnosis."*

Also some of the other negative implications of external assessment, known from different researches (Boud, 1995), such as *back-wash effect*, can evidently be noticed within the lower secondary level, grades 6-8 of elementary school.

The main problem is the construction of the examination questions. We can stress understanding, deep approach to learning, practical knowledge and other kinds of "real" knowledge, but when the final examination is asking mainly for facts and memorisation, pupils will learn for and from the examination tasks and will judge the importance of knowledge by the examination. Not only pupils, teachers also tend to prepare pupils specifically for the test (*"measurement driven instruction"*, Stobart and Gipps, 1997).

Assessment influences learning in different ways, and many of them are positive (as motivation). So we can also find some positive effects of final examinations, such as more attention and importance to the construction of examination questions, raising the standards at some schools, more responsibility from some pupils and their parents and also some kind of common endeavor for good results from all "stakeholders": teachers, pupils and parents.

### **3.4 Assessment at different levels**

As a form of differentiation at some schools (which in general are mainstream) a form of flexible differentiation that means a combination of mainstream and two or three ability groups instructions has already been introduced as an experimental change (usually in two subjects, Math and Slovene and/or Foreign language) at second stage (year 6-8) of elementary (8 year) school.

According to the instructions the assessment is also organised at different levels and pupils, for example, from the lowest ability group can not achieve the highest mark (5), the performance at the level of their group could be assessed with the mark 3 as a maximum.

This kind of assessment is somehow logical, but not accepted with enthusiasm from all parents and/or teachers. Some of them do not feel this kind of assessment fair to all pupils.

### **3.5. Planned and announced terms of teacher assessment**

Planning and announcing the exact terms for written and also for some oral forms of teacher assessment is also something new in the assessment practices at lower secondary level.

The background idea is "positive approach": the opportunity for all pupils to prepare for assessment and with this a possibility to "catch the pupil when he/she is good"; to reduce the stress of unannounced assessment and to raise the pupils' responsibility for assessment results.

Once more we are faced with conflicting purposes and different perceptions of the ideas, so a lack of interest for learning can be noticed with some pupils when the assessment terms are not close or near in the future. Some pupils and also their parents understand such assessment arrangement literally and complain when teachers assess knowledge for formative purposes. Some teachers are also not satisfied, they feel restricted in their ability to create their own assessment culture.

## PROBLEM

Elaborated practices, which are the most dominating changes inside the Slovenian school practice, can be grouped into two categories, according to the level of reception within the education field:

- \* practices which are accepted with high consensus of nearly all interested parts (educational authorities, teachers, parents, pupils);

- \* practices which provoke very different opinions - from enthusiasm to complete rejections.

The first group is also nearly identical with the so called "**bottom-up**" movement (descriptive assessment, practical assessment), while the second group is often a result of **top-down directions** (external examinations and all kinds of regulations for teacher assessment regarding form (oral, written), time (prior announcing), reports to parents and others).

According to general opinion and to some partial analyses within some schools, we just assume the (above mentioned) level and the direction of the reception for specific assessment practices. We do not have systematic overview about these opinions.

For implementing all the different changes at schools the role of the headteacher is becoming (partly due to new legislation) more important. It is also known that the "*heads' involvement supporting their staff meant that there is a feeling of 'being in it together'...*" (Stobart and Gipps, 1997, p. 71).

In accordance to these premises the decision was made to investigate, as a first phase of study the perception of assessment changes from the viewpoint of headteachers. The second phase is planned as a data collection from teachers (questionnaires and some other sources) to study teachers' attitudes towards the new assessment practices.

At this stage no attempt can be made to make generalisations from the data, just some trends and a base for further research.

## METHOD

### 1. Instrument

The anonymous questionnaire (one 5-point scale question, 2 multi-choice, one YES/NO /agree, disagree/, one open ended question and some data about the school and about the headteacher her/himself: gender and years of experience as a headteacher) was prepared and handed out to a group of headteachers attending a seminar on educational management (46 respondents). 60 questionnaires were posted to head teachers in different places, many of them in Ljubljana (the capital of Slovenia) and its surroundings; 49 of them (81%) were returned.

## 2. Sample

### 2.1. Gender

The structure of sample is as follows:

<b>all together:</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100%</b>
female:	54	57%
male:	41	43%

### 2.2. Years of experiences as a headteacher:

	1st group	2nd group	All	%
less than 2 years (less than half of one period)	18	6	24	<b>25</b>
2 to 4 years (half to one period for headteacher)	10	5	15	<b>16</b>
5 to 8 years (second period as a headteacher)	7	15	22	<b>23</b>
more than 8 years (more than two periods)	11	23	34	<b>36</b>
<b>all together</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100</b>

As it was assumed, the first group (participants at the educational management seminar) evidently consists of a greater number of less experienced headteachers, while in the second group (mainly headteachers in bigger towns) more experienced headteachers are dominating. Within the sample as a whole, all groups of headteachers (according to the experience and also to the gender) are represented.

## **RESULTS with analysis and discussion of the data**

(The results are presented in the same order as the questions within the questionnaire.)

### **1. Opinion about the changes already implemented in the school**

(where the respondent is a headteacher)

The list of changes was written and the headteachers were asked to assess each one with a 5 point scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, against, strongly against). Additional option was possible for headteachers without experience about a specific change: "no experience".

The percentage for positive or negative opinion was calculated from the number of respondents with experience about a specific change.

#### 1.1. Descriptive assessment

Only 14 from 95 respondents (15%) do not have experience with descriptive assessment, the majority of others (88%) have a positive opinion about this change, 53 % among them strongly agree with it.

#### 1.2. Announced written (teacher) examination

As this change is part of new rules within the school, no one answered with "no experience", a great majority strongly agree (52,5%), 95% hold a positive opinion (agree and strongly agree).

1.3. Announced oral (teacher) examination is not characterised by with such common agreement, 52,5% of the respondents have a positive opinion, but only 11% of them strongly agree with this arrangement, while 29% hold a negative opinion, 18% are neutral.

#### 1.4. Assessment at different levels

This change is not so frequent as descriptive assessment, 33% of the respondents have no experience with it. Among others (who have experiences) 67% have a positive opinion (25% strongly agree), while 12% hold a negative opinion and 20% are neutral.

#### 1.5 Final external examination

This change is also the practice within all schools, so all headteachers have some experience with it: 67% have a positive opinion (only 15% strongly agree), 19% have a negative opinion about this, basically a controversial measure, 14% are neutral.

Some respondents mentioned also some other measures (e.g. combination of numerical and descriptive assessment, assessment of project/practical work) specific for their school. As they themselves introduced it, they normally have positive experiences (and positive opinions) with these measures.

Looking for differences between two groups of respondents, a slight tendency can be observed in the direction that the headteachers with more years of experiences hold less enthusiastic opinions towards final external examination and also towards assessment at different (ability) levels, but they approved the announced oral examination more frequently.

The rank list of approval (agree and strongly agree) of changes, when only headteachers with experience with a specific change are taken into account:

1. announced written examination
2. descriptive assessment
3. final external examination
4. assessment at different levels
5. announced oral examination

## **2. Perceived difference between two levels (classroom and subject level) within the school**

The common opinion is that there are less problems with assessment at classroom level (year 1-4), where one teacher is responsible for all subjects and is able to have an insight in the strengths, weaknesses or potential problems of each child.

Headteachers were asked to compare the assessment situation at both levels. Half of them (53%) do not notice any difference, and 64% among them think that the situation is good at both levels, 24% of them are convinced that there are a lot of problems at both levels, others (22%) do not specify the direction of no-difference.

According to our expectations, 44% of respondents expressed the opinion that the situation is better at classroom level and only 3% of them answered that the assessment situation is better at subject level (year 5-8).

### **3. Implemented measures for improving the assessment practices at school**

Headteachers were asked about possible measures for improving the assessment situation they already adopted at their school during the period of the last few years. Four most known and frequent measures were already listed and headteachers were invited to add their own.

62% of respondents signed (or wrote) three or more measures, the most frequent answer are special conferences about assessment with all teachers at school (87%), nearly the same number (84%) mentioned participation of their teachers at special inservice seminars about assessment. The next answer (67%) is studying relevant articles and books, then inviting experts to the school (41%).

27% of the headteachers added some other measures, the most frequent are individual discussions with teachers and workshops with groups of teachers (e.g. classroom teachers, teachers of math, mother tongue, etc.), they also mentioned special conferences with parents.

When looking for the difference between the two groups of headteachers, it is notable that more experienced headteachers mentioned more measures, they also gave many more additional answers.

### **4. Headteachers' perception of the nature and trends within the changes in assessment practices**

A list of 15 statements about the nature and trends of assessment changes was given to the respondents and they were asked to answer with YES (agree with the statement), with NO (disagree) or to answer with "don't know".

The respondents (all together, n = 95):

- \* agree that changes contribute to more responsible procedures within assessment (**88%**);
- \* agree that the changes are pupil-oriented (**87%**);
- \* agree that changes contribute to the reduction of stress (**83%**);
- \* agree that changes are relevant (are not "just something new") (**80%**);
- \* disagree that changes reduce the autonomy of the school (**79%**), at the same time they also disagree that changes strengthen the autonomy of the school (43%);
- \* agree that changes have purposeful, not just administrative nature (**78%**);



- \* disagree that changes reduce the autonomy of teachers (73%), they also disagree that changes strengthen teachers' autonomy (43%);
- \* disagree that changes reduce the responsibility of pupils and their parents (71%);
- \* agree that changes strengthen the responsibility of pupils and their parents (66%);
- \* agree that changes contribute to a clearer, unambiguous and responsible assessment system (66%).

It is evident that as a group the headteachers are quite convinced in the general positive direction of changes, they agree with the majority of statements which express a positive direction and disagree with those expressing the negative one. Regarding the autonomy (schools' and teachers' as well) they feel neither omitted nor stimulated.

Less agreement is evident about the contribution of changes to the quality of pupils' knowledge (52% agree): one third (34%) of the respondents "do not know" the direction of changes within this specific issue.

More than half of the respondents (59%) disagree with the opinion that the changes are teacher-oriented. This is understandable, as the majority of changes are time-consuming, especially at the introductory phase.

Headteachers were also invited to add some thoughts about the changes, their direction and consequences.

These additional comments are mostly individual, only some of them common to several respondents.

The most frequent comments refer to the nature of assessment, headteachers think that it is still not formative enough - there is too much assessing for marks and not enough assessment just for formative feedback. There are also more comments about the announced oral assessment: a number of headteachers added that this arrangement does not contribute to regular learning and to good learning strategies of pupils. Many comments stress the positive nature of changes, evident in more responsibility of all stakeholders, in more positive climate at schools and also in higher value of knowledge. They are aware that changing is a long range process, therefore they warn against not well considered and hasty changes.

## **5. Proposed measures for the improvement of the assessment situation**

The headteachers were asked to propose concrete measures for the improvement of the assessment situation within their school and also at the national level.

The majority of them (heads with more experience more frequently) proposed a list of measures for both levels. It is evident that the headteachers are aware which measures can be really implemented only at the school level (e.g. team-work, formative assessment), and which should have a general, state-wide nature (assessment policy, guidelines for implementing changes). Some of their answers can be grouped: they are not the same, but express the same idea. The majority of the proposals are already known, some of them expressing very up-to-date premises (team-work, pupil's involvement in assessment), some already practiced at schools (discussions

about the criteria and assessment procedures at school, in-service seminars), but there are also some very original ones (e.g. possibility for teachers to consult somebody /experts, consultants, colleagues, .../ before important assessment decisions), expressing the experience that assessment situations are stressful also for teachers.

#### 5.1. Measures proposed for the school level

(Answers are grouped and listed according to the frequency of mentioning.)

- more coordination, team-work and discussions about the assessment procedures and criteria within the school;
- more attention to all elements (feedback, self-assessment, strategies for improvement) of formative assessment;
- more in-service seminars at schools to help teachers implement assessment innovations;
- headteachers' systematic approach to the assessment issues within the school (observing lessons, analysing, discussions with individual teachers, systematic school evaluation for each year, creating a stimulating assessment climate);
- more coordination and discussion with parents to achieve more parental responsibility;
- more pupil involvement in assessment procedures;
- less written (teacher-made) tests, creating data base of test items prepared by groups of teachers;
- teachers should have an opportunity for consultation with somebody (experts, consultants, colleagues, ...) before important assessment decisions.

#### 5.2. Measures proposed for the state level

(Answers are grouped and listed according to the frequency of mentioning.)

- more systematic attention to the teacher training for the assessment within pre-service and at in-service level as well;
- more attention to assessment principles, policy and practice at the state level, more help from the experts;
- more debates about the standards, setting the standards;
- more discussions and more information about the changes before implementation;
- more systematic help to the teachers (when the changes are being implemented) with clear guidelines;
- creating clear, unambiguous regulations for school assessment;
- creating data base of test items (for different subjects) at national level for teacher assessment;
- relying on teacher's opinion and school experiences when implementing changes;
- more attention to the quality of knowledge at all levels and within all measures;
- more assessment evaluation studies at the national level.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

**It can be concluded that the heads' answers are within the expectations. Their attitudes to current changes and practices are generally positive; their agreement is stronger when the "bottom-up" changes and changes declared as pupil-oriented are under question and**

weaker about some controversial measures (external assessment). They are aware of a whole range of weaknesses and they themselves are already striving in the direction of solving the problems.

Their proposals are realistic, in many cases congruent with the official policy (e.g. in-service priorities).

One of the most worrying findings must be stressed again: the headteachers are not sure if the changes are oriented towards quality in knowledge. To find out the answer to this specific issue, some more studies should be made, which would include the opinions and experiences of the teachers, who are directly involved in assessment practices.

Without new research it is evident that our efforts should be focused on certain measures (similar list is suggested by headteachers):

- more information and more instructions about the changes;
- carefully designed inservice seminars (according to our experiences the teachers from

schools have more possibilities /they also have more power/ to change the assessment climate and assessment procedures in schools);

- more guidelines for teachers;
- more discussion about formative assessment with clear suggestions for classroom practice;
- more attention on the design of appropriate external tests;
- more attention to designing such approaches in assessment, which will improve the quality of learning and teaching, as "*...the greatest challenge, and the most exciting one, is finding ways of using assessment explicitly to support learning*" (Editorial, 1995, p. 128).

A list of strategies and tactics proposed by Black & Wiliam (1998) could also be helpful; together with the concluding message of Hattie and Jaeger (1998, p. 119), that "*... the factors which are most effective at improving student learning (by assessment) are clearly in the hands of teachers.*"

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